

**Written Testimony**  
**Appropriations Committee Public Hearing**  
**February 28, 2011**

My name is James Classon and I am currently enrolled in the DARC (drug and alcohol recovery counselor) program, scheduled to graduate in May 2011.

I enrolled in college fresh out of high school in 1988, and to say I had a lackluster performance would be a nice way of putting it. I was battling a chronic illness for much of my childhood, and the symptoms became so severe that I was required to undergo major abdominal surgery in 1989 and a second surgery in 1990. This timeframe in my life was, to say the least, very stressful and angst-filled. I was enrolled in school full-time throughout this entire process but, due to depression issues as well as the surgical recovery process, I did not put a concerted effort into school.

Little did I know that a lifetime later I would be back in school pursuing a degree. I had many fears about being an older adult (I learned that we are called non-traditional students) in school as well as trying to battle back and get grades good enough to try and offset the poor showing that I had when I was a teenage/young adult.

I became unemployed in November 2009 when my employer was conducting corporate restructuring under federal bankruptcy laws. I had visited MCC many times over the last few years dreaming of finishing my degree. The DARC program caught my eye, as I am a person in addiction recovery. During my active addiction process I hit rock bottom - losing my home, job, getting divorced, becoming homeless not to mention seriously straining my relationship with my teenage daughter. I found out that I had chronic liver illness that was so severe at the time, that I was literally given 6 months to live if I continued drinking. Because of the counselors I had seen during my recovery process, I was able to learn to change my thoughts and behaviors and have remained in recovery for over 5 years. During that time, I have re-married my first wife, have improved my relationships with my daughter and my entire family, and have excelled in school beyond my wildest dreams.

I researched my options when I enrolled for the Spring 2010 semester at Manchester Community College and found the fresh start program, which I applied for and was accepted into. In the spring 2010 semester I completed 18 credits (made the President's List with a 4.0 GPA) and 6 credits during the summer 2010 break with a 4.0 GPA, also finishing the Fall 2010 semester taking 15 credits, again, attaining a 4.0 GPA as well as being named to the President's List again.

I have since been accepted into Phi Theta Kappa national honor society. I have to give a lot of credit to the professors at Manchester Community College, whose brains I picked quite often but were always very willing to help me with whatever I needed to do my best work. I can't even begin to tell you how many emails back and forth I have had with professors at Manchester Community College, and professors who I can walk by in the halls, and they know my name...AMAZING how personally involved the staff is, and how at ease they make students feel.

I felt that this was not only a fresh start for my schooling, but a fresh start in a quest to pursue my dream of finishing my associate degree. This Manchester Community College experience is paving a path to a future that I can look forward to, in aspects of self worth, employment, and education. I would say that attending Manchester Community College has given me my life back beyond my wildest dreams.

I had applied for FAFSA financial aid and was granted one semester of aid, with the second semester (Spring 2011) denied because I have exceeded the amount of allowed credit (passed or attempted) for an associate degree program, and I have the lackluster performance I described above to thank for that. I was in a panic because I was a semester away from graduating and not able to afford the tuition because I have

been out of work. I had spoken with the people in the Financial Aid office, and they advised that there is no "wiggle room" in the financial aid distribution because of the amount of credits I had on file, completed or attempted (over 90).

I was put in touch with Martin Hart who guided me towards applying for scholarship money that was available to students who met the criteria. Again, the personal touch that came with all the help I received will be remembered for my entire life, as the people cared about me as a person, and not a number on an attendance roster. I was able to secure a scholarship that certainly helped me with the tuition for the Spring 2011 semester, in which I hope to graduate.

I feel that the Community College system is an invaluable asset to the people of Connecticut as it makes it a real viable option for people who may not be ready for the rigors of a 4-year school to get their "feet wet" in the college study cycle. Further, the non-traditional students such as my-self who are working or hoping to further or change their work situation can count on the Community College system as an affordable yet invaluable tool to work towards that goal of self improvement. Not only will this help people in their self worth, it certainly helps Connecticut improve the quality of the work force and ultimately to help the economy grow.

I plan to seek employment in the behavioral health field armed with my associate degree, working towards to the required hours necessary to be a certified addiction counselor. Further, I plan to continue on with my education at Central Connecticut State University with hopes to achieve a degree in social work. My plans after CCSU are continue my educational pursuits and receive a master's degree in social work, and become certified as a Licensed Alcohol and Drug Counselor (LADC).

On a more personal note, I have a daughter who is a senior in high school this year who attends Mercy High School in Middletown, CT. She is scheduled to graduate next spring and I think it would be incredibly special to be able to share her graduation with my own. I don't know how many parents can say that they graduated school the same year that their child did, but I would have to say not too many. I have thought of that goal since I started the DARC program in Jan. 2010, and would say that has been a motivator for me in my quest for education at the Community College level.

I would also like to give my highest regards to the DARC program coordinator Professor Bobbi Fox, who has pushed me to be the best student that I can be. Further, she has recommended me to sit on a Legislative Task force, as well as getting me involved in a professional organization C.A.A.P. (Connecticut Association of Addiction Professionals) as a member of the executive board as a student liaison. Again, the personal interaction that Professor Fox exhibits from her students is ACES in my book. I feel that Professor Fox exhibits the high standards by which the Connecticut Community College should be regarded, when it comes to possible funding from the state government.

It is my opinion that the Connecticut Community College system should have their budget increased so as to entice more people to strive to achieve the dream of a college degree.

Respectfully submitted,

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